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ABSTRACT

The role of the computer in the classroom can range from "toy" to be used when boredom sets in to mechanical monster that monopolizes precious classroom time with little residual benefit. However, a middle ground exists. At Auburn University (Alabama), the computer is used in an intermediate French course to complement rather than replace personal interactive instruction. Due to the lack of available high-quality and text-compatible software, the teacher, previously uninterested in computer use, used basic programming skills to write sets of exercises and drills with appropriate prompts, feedback, and other usual software elements. After some experimentation, a system was developed wherein students could go to the computers at a convenient time for them, check out a prepared diskette, and do the exercises. The exercises were used only after regular teacher presentation of the materials in class. Student response has been positive, and some students have found that in a more advanced class they perform best on material they have practiced previously on the computer. Experimenting with computer use can be instructionally effective and be a balance to the less interesting tasks of class administration. (MSE)

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The Computer in the Foreign Language Classroom: "Mogwai" or Gremlin?

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The computer in the foreign-language classroom: "mogwai" or gremlin? According to a popular horror-fantasy film last summer, a cute little cuddly, furry creature known as a "mogwai" can, when certain rules are broken (such as no light, no water, no food after midnight), become a host of hideous monstersintent on devouring their masters and wreaking general havoc in a household. There seems to be a certain analogy, although perhaps only slight, with the use of computers in an academic setting. The computer can be fun, playful, even "cute," but when the "rules" are broken (such as no structured presentation, no sound pedagogical principle, no supervision, etc.), it can become no more than an electronic "babysitter," wreaking general havoc with our lesson plans, our classroom presentations, and overall student performance.

Between these two extremes of a "cute" toy to be brought out of the academic closet only when boredom sets in and a mechanical monster that monopolizes precious classroom time with little residual benefit, there appears to be what the French call *le juste milieu*, or "golden mean," in the use of computers in foreign-language teaching. During a first experience with computers in an intermediate French class at Auburn University, in which, as an experiment, we attempted to utilize the computer as a *complement* to teaching instead of a replacement for personal interactive instruction between the teacher and student. It is to be hoped that the results of this experience may encourage others who have been somewhat hesitant to let the "newfangled electronic contraptions" invade their classrooms to experiment themselves with the computer as an ever-ready teacher's assistant, who will never become impatient after answering the same question over and over and over again, even at the end of a very long day, without even a single coffee break in the faculty lounge.

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As further encouragement for direct involvement with computers in the foreign language classroom, one must view my comments as coming from a "computer convert," who, having shied away as long as possible from the new electronic gadgetry being used all around me, is and was far from a computer expert. However, by reading numerous articles in periodicals such as *Computers and Humanities*, by seeing success stories reported in education literature, and by hearing friends and colleagues in other disciplines tell me of their exciting accomplishments with the computer, it became quite obvious that "computers are here to stay." They are no fad, no whim of pedagogical fashion. They are not like the short-lived "teaching machines" of the late fifties and early sixties whose lack of flexibility and direct interaction with the student soon belied many so-called experts' prediction that these marvelous machines would become the teacher-robots of the future, eventually replacing the warm-blooded bodies in our profession. We are still very much alive and well in the classroom and certainly intend to be so for quite some time. But since we are "still here," what can we do to assure that we can adapt to ever-changing technology and environmental situations? Perhaps my personal experience of adaptation at Auburn in a sixth-quarter French class, in which intensive grammar review plays a significant part, can offer a beginning to the answer to that question.

After my decision to use the computer in some way in my course, it was discovered, to my dismay, that high-quality software or pre-packaged programs for French were practically non-existent or difficult to obtain, and even if they were available, they were not at all compatible with my text. The grammar units were introduced at different times, at a more simplistic level, etc. I even discovered some programs on the market where unbelievable grammatical errors abounded. I am afraid the culprit in these instances is the software company who hired a computer specialist with only a couple of years of high-school French to write the programs. (Recent good news is that more and more foreign language teachers are becoming directly involved with software development.) Therefore, my last resort was to write the programs exactly as needed. Fortunately, my elementary experience with the BASIC computer language was enough to get me started. It did not take long to absorb just enough principles of programming to enable me to write entire sets of exercises and drills with appropriate prompts, positive feedback, and many other usual computer program "accouterments." I have listed below (see Figure 1) an example of a very simple program that could be used, with slight modification, on any computer to write various types of verbs and vocabulary drills, substitution exercises, etc. Anyone who is interested in computer usage in the classroom, even if he knows absolutely nothing about programming, could with a little experimentation adapt it for his own use. One could even enlist

the aid of a computer whiz in class, or a computer aficionado among colleagues, even in another discipline, who would probably welcome the chance to help someone else get started in this direction. There are also available now very useful programming aids, known as "authoring languages" and "authoring systems," which enable instructors with little or no computer experience to begin writing drills, exercises, even complete lessons, after only a moderate amount of practice.

```
010   READ A$,B$
020   IF A$="FIN" THEN GOTO 100
030   PRINT A$
040   INPUT C$
050   IF C$=B$ THEN GOTO 80
060   PRINT "INCORRECT"
070   GOTO 10
080   PRINT "CORRECT"
090   GOTO 10
100   STOP <or END>
110   DATA "Il ... entré.","est"
120   DATA "Nous ... changé.","avons"
130   DATA "Elles ... arrivées.","sont"
...   ...  ...
...   ...  ...   <other DATA lines>
...   ...  ...
...   DATA "FIN","xxx"  <final DATA line>
```

Figure 1
Simple Verb Drill Program
(Passé Composé)

After a few weeks of experimentation with my grammar programs, I developed several sets of exercises and drills on the past tense and the subjunctive mood. These were then put on 5-1/4 inch floppy disks. After we had discussed the grammar points in class, students could then go, at a time convenient to their schedule, to the microcomputer lab where there are over twenty IBM Personal Computers at their disposal, check out a disk and begin work. Let me reiterate that this exercise disk was not used to *present* the grammatical concept to the class. Students had access to the disk only after my regular classroom presentation so that it would reinforce the exercises and drills previously performed in class. For the disk, I actually used, with slight modification, some of the exercises taken directly from the textbook.

Student response to this new instructional technique was overwhelmingly positive. Students were continually asking me to "put on" new exercises for them to complete. Of course, some of this enthusiasm must be attributed to the "newness" of the idea and the general attraction that computers hold for the younger generation. However, many students had never had before what is called a "hands-on" experience with the computer, so there was even a double benefit involved here.

Even much later, several students in this class told me that they performed much better in a more advanced class when they got to the units where they had done exercises on the computer, because they remembered specific rules and structures that were reinforced by these drills. It is my plan to continue the implementation and further development of computer-assisted instruction, or more descriptively, computer-complemented instruction, in my courses at Auburn University. As one comes to realize upon beginning to investigate computer usage in academic settings, it is certainly true that "the sky is the limit." There are more and more sophisticated systems becoming available every day using recorded tapes so that pronunciation and spoken responses can be evaluated, even corrected by the computer. (See Geoffrey R. Hope, Heimy F. Taylor, and James P. Pusack, *Using Computers in Teaching Foreign Language* [New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1984].)

State-of-the-art technology offers a system that uses video disc players or videotape recorders to coordinate sight and sound into a realistic visit to a foreign country, complete with a guided tour by a native speaker. One such program is "Montevidisco" developed at Brigham Young University. Of course, most high school and college budgets preclude such ventures into high technology, but perhaps as the value of these applications to foreign-language learning becomes more well known, grants from private and public sources will be forthcoming for their implementation.

In conclusion, while the activities mentioned above have just "scratched the surface" of computer usage in the classroom, and while some colleagues have far surpassed my initial efforts in this direction, it should be noted that these machines can be used as well for other activities related to teaching duties. They can take much of the drudgery out of administrative "busy work," such as keeping attendance and homework completion records up to date, recording scores, and even, within the more traditional role associated with the computer, calculating final averages. On the academic side, computers can be used to *present* new material to students so that the more gifted ones can proceed at their own pace without being held back by others. But lest the fear of "early retirement" for all *human* teaching machines rear its ugly head, all of us in our profession should be reminded that with the advent of the microcomputer and concomitant computer-assisted instruction programs, many experts, perhaps some of the same recalcitrant ones that heralded the arrival of the teaching machines, began proclaimint the impending "Twilight of the Gods" for the classroom teacher. But this just has not happened. Why not? The answer is really quite simple. Until the computer manufacturers can program a computer to interact emotionally with a student, who, after hours and hours of hard work and effort, reaches heights of success never thought possible, or shed tears of desperation when another student, after the same painful struggle, fails miserably—until they can make a computer to do that, we have nothing to worry about. Realizing this, then, we can all view the computer as neither "mogwai" nor gremlin, but just a helpful tool with no more threat to our existence than the chalk and blackboard that we use every day.